



FBI 100
First Strike: Global Terror in America



Investigators going through the rubble following the bombing of the World Trade Center.

Story Index

By Date

By Subject

- Art Theft
- Civil Rights
- Counterterrorism
- Crimes Against Children
- Criminal Justice Information Services
- Cyber Crimes
- Director/FBI Leadership
- Field Cases
- Foreign Counterintelligence
- General
- History
- Intelligence
- International
- Lab/Operational Technology
- Linguist/Translation Program
- Major Thefts/Violent Crime
- Organized Crime/Drugs
- Partnerships
- Public/Community Outreach
- Public Corruption
- Recruiting/Diversity
- Responding to Your Concerns
- Technology
- Training
- White-Collar Crime

02/26/08

Part 2 of our history series commemorating the FBI's 100th anniversary in 2008.

Fifteen years ago this week, at about 17 minutes past noon, a thunderous explosion rocked lower Manhattan.

The epicenter was the parking garage beneath the World Trade Center, where a massive eruption carved out a nearly 100-foot crater several stories deep and several more high. Six people were killed almost instantly. Smoke and flames began filling the wound and streaming upward into the building. Those who weren't trapped were soon pouring out of the building—many panic-stricken and covered in soot. More than a thousand people were hurt in some way, some badly, with crushed limbs.

It was Friday, February 26, 1993, and Middle Eastern terrorism had arrived on American soil—with a bang.

As a small band of terrorists scurried away from the scene unnoticed, the FBI and its partners on the New York Joint Terrorism Task Force began staffing up a command center and preparing to send in a team to investigate. Their instincts told them that this was terrorism—they'd been tracking Islamic fundamentalists in the city for months and, they'd later learn, were tantalizingly close to encountering the planners of this attack. But hunches weren't enough; what was needed was definitive proof.

They'd have it soon enough. The massive investigation that followed—led by the task force, with some 700 FBI agents worldwide ultimately joining in—quickly uncovered a key bit of evidence. In the rubble investigators uncovered a vehicle identification number on a piece of wreckage that seemed suspiciously obliterated. A search of our crime records





returned a match: the number belonged to a rented van reported stolen the day before the attack. An Islamic

fundamentalist named Mohammad Salameh had rented the vehicle, we learned, and on March 4, an FBI SWAT team arrested him as he tried in vain to get his \$400 deposit back.

One clue led to another and we soon had in custody three more suspects—Nidal Ayyad, Mahmoud Abouhalima, and Ahmed Ajaj. We’d also found the apartment where the bomb was built and a storage locker containing dangerous chemicals, including enough cyanide gas to wipe out a town. All four men were tried, convicted, and sentenced to life.

The shockwave from the attack continued to reverberate. Following the unfolding connections, the task force soon uncovered a second terrorist plot to bomb a series of New York landmarks simultaneously, including the U.N. building, the Holland and Lincoln Tunnels, and the federal plaza where our office in New York is housed. On June 24, 1994, FBI agents stormed a warehouse in Queens and caught several members of a terrorist cell in the act of assembling bombs.

Meanwhile, the mastermind of the World Trade Center bombing was still on the run—and up to no good. We’d learned his name—Ramzi Yousef—within weeks after the attack and discovered he was planning more attacks, including the simultaneous bombing of a dozen U.S. international flights. Yousef was captured in Pakistan in February 1995, returned to America, and convicted along with the van driver, Eyad Ismoil. A seventh plotter, Abdul Yasin, remains at large.

We later learned from Yousef that his Trade Center plot was far more sinister. He wanted the bomb to topple one tower, with the collapsing debris knocking down the second. The attack turned out to be something of a deadly dress rehearsal for 9/11; with the help of Yousef’s uncle Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, al Qaeda would later return to realize Yousef’s nightmarish vision.



The FBI 100 Series:

- Ramzi Yousef Wanted Poster Images
- Part 1: An Odd Couple of Crime
- More History stories